

Unworthy Participants at the Lord's Supper, According to 1 Corinthians 11 and the Formula of Concord

by John A. Trapp

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“God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life” (1 John 5:11b,12). There are, in the judgment of God, but two kinds of people in our world: those who know and believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and their Savior from sin, and those who do not.

Accordingly, our Lutheran Confessions distinguish between two kinds of guests at the Lord's Table: the worthy, and the unworthy—namely, those who recognize the Son of God in the Sacrament and believe what He offers and gives them there, and those who do not. Wherever they speak about the reception of the Sacrament, all of the Confessions maintain this basic and necessary distinction. And they build their conclusions not only on an analogy drawn from what the Bible says about believers and unbelievers in general, but also and especially on the clear words and statements of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (Particularly in vs. 27-29). Of all the Confessions, the *Formula of Concord* gives this Pauline passage the lengthiest consideration, and with good reason. For when Luther died, the doctor died indeed. The cancer of Crypto-Calvinism immediately began to spread. The only lasting remedy lay in an exhaustive and distinctively Lutheran statement on the controverted doctrine—chiefly (if someone is looking for an order of importance) on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. When the formulators of the *Formula* composed “Article VII” (Of the Holy Supper), they also took pains to include lengthy quotations from the existing confessional writings. In this way they successfully separated the wheat of truth from the chaff and confusion of Melancthon's endless *Variata*, and they demonstrated the true confessional unity which had existed all along among those Lutherans who were faithful to the Holy Scriptures.

In light of the historic and current significance of this document, and in view of our present celebration, it is appropriate to consider the subjects “Unworthy Participants at the Lord's Supper, According to 1 Corinthians 11 and the Formula of Concord.”

In keeping with our purpose, then, let us ponder, first of all, the biblical basis for our teaching on this matter; secondly, the doctrinal conclusions of the Formula of Concord; and finally, some pertinent practical and pastoral concerns.

I

In 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, the inspired Apostle writes:

“Ὡστε ὃς ἂν ἐσθίῃ τὸν ἄρτον ἢ πίνη τῷ ποτέρῳ τοῦ κυρίου ἀναξίως, ἔνοχος ἔσται τοῦ σώματος καὶ τοῦ κυρίου. Δοκιμαζέτω δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτὸν, καὶ οὕτως ἐκ τοῦ ἄρτου ἐσθιέτω καὶ τοῦ ποτερίου πινέτω· ὁ γὰρ ἐσθίων καὶ πίνων κρίμα ἑαυτῷ ἐσθίει καὶ πίνει μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα.

So, then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty of the Lord's body and blood! But let a person examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink from the cup; because whoever eats and drinks without discerning the [Lord's] body, eats and drinks his own condemnation.

“Ὡστε signals a major statement: a summary, a conclusion, a directive, or a warning. In good pedagogical-fashion, Paul often uses the conjunction in this way. For example, in this same letter, after listing

the sins of ancient Israel in the wilderness, he warns and concludes, “Ὡστε, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall!” (10:12). Again, in bringing to a close the chapter we are looking at, he writes, “Ὡστε, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another. And if any man hunger, let him eat at home; that ye come not together unto condemnation” (11:33,34a).

In the entire section on the Corinthian abuse of the Sacrament (vs. 17-34) Paul uses Ὡστε twice. The first time (v. 27), it opens the door to a severe warning about their *attitude* when coming to the Lord’s Table. And this warning follows at the heels of Paul’s reminder about the essence and purpose of the Sacrament (vs. 23-26). With the second Ὡστε, (v.33) he draws the whole matter (vs. 17-32) to firm, but gentler, conclusion. He tells them to drop their customary *agape* meal. It was no longer an adiaphoron for them. It was no longer edifying. In fact, it had served Satan well and had grown into a monster. It would be far better for them to come together in humble simplicity for the single purpose of worshiping God and receiving the Sacrament worthily. Ὡστε ὃς ἂν ἐσθίῃ τὸν ἄρτον ἢ πίνη τῷ ποτέριον τοῦ κυρίου ἀναξίως, ἔνοχος ἔσται τοῦ σώματος καὶ τοῦ κυρίου (v. 27). Two words that stand side by side in the Greek text immediately shock us into paying close attention: ἀναξίως and ἔνοχος. There is such a thing as receiving the Sacrament “unworthily.” And those who do, make themselves “guilty” before God—guilty, in fact, of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

ἀναξίως means “unworthily.” The adjective ἄξιος, when it refers to a person or his activity, points to an intrinsic merit, or deserving. For example, in Romans 1:32 God condemns those who are guilty of adultery, murder, deceit, etc., and He says, “they which commit such thing are ἄξιοι of death.” In Acts 13:46 and Barnabas affirm that the Jews who rejected the Gospel consequently judged themselves “οὐκ ἄξιους of everlasting life” (Acts 13:46).

Likewise the ἀναξίως in our passage does not indicate a manner of eating and drinking which is merely improper, or outwardly and socially incorrect. It is a matter of the heart. Unworthy sacramental, eating or drinking makes a person ἔνοχος (guilty) before God. Furthermore, prior self-examination (v. 28) and a recognition of the Lord’s bodily presence in the Sacrament (v. 29) are necessary to prevent the sin of unworthy participation.

Many in Corinth had obviously forgotten what Paul had taught them about the Lord’s Supper (v. 23a). By their ill behavior (vs. 18,19,21), they made a God-pleasing celebration of the Sacrament impossible (v. 20). Now, it may be true that some members of the congregation simply had a natural talent for being rude, but they are not the ones mentioned in vs. 18-21. There Paul describes a rudeness well-calculated and a behavior that smelled of personal hatred (v. 18), doctrinal uncertainty (v. 19), greed, selfishness, and pride (v. 21)—all of which thrive in a *heart* that is not right with God.

If this is the attitude with which they had approached the Lord’s Table, they ate and drank “their own condemnation.” They made themselves as guilty of sinning against the body of Jesus as were Pontius Pilate, the mocking soldiers, and the Jews who shouted, “Crucify him!”

For “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, will be guilty τοῦ σώματος καὶ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ κυρίου.” With this application and stern warning, Paul confirms the real, bodily presence of Christ in the Sacrament. As Luther observes, if Paul did not want us to believe that the unworthy guest actually receives the body of Christ, “Paul would have had to say: ‘Whoever eats this bread unworthily sins against the Lord’s Supper, or against God, or against the command, or against the Lord’s directive.’ Now the nature and manner of the words require the conclusion that whoever *eats* unworthily is guilty in respect to *what* he eats.... The text drives home the fact that the sin takes place in the *eating* and *drinking* ... and that the sin is committed against the Lord’s *body* and *blood*” (Walch, IX, 321).

When we also recall the simple words of Jesus, “This *is* My body; ... this *is* My blood,” it is impossible to conclude, as do the Reformed, that the “unworthy recipient” is merely sinning against the bread and the wine—like someone who spits on the President’s picture or desecrates the flag of his country. Here Paul is speaking about a real sin against the real thing, namely, the Lord’s body and blood.

So let them hear what Paul has to say: Δοκιμαζέτω δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἑαυτόν, καὶ οὕτως ἐκ τοῦ ἄρτου ἐσθιέτω καὶ τοῦ ποτερπίου πινέτω· ὁ γὰρ ἐσθίων καὶ πίνων κρίμα ἑαυτῷ ἐσθίει καὶ πίνει μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα (vs. 28,29). Let them examine what is in their hearts, repent of their sins, and remember and believe what Christ offers and gives to them in the Sacrament!

By continuing as he does, Paul steers them away from any fleshly conclusion that they should now stay away from the Sacrament for fear of receiving it unworthily. He says, “Let a man examine himself, καὶ οὕτως ἐκ τοῦ ἄρτου ἐσθιέτω καὶ τοῦ ποτερπίου πινέτω.” Let him join the rest of the congregation in partaking of (ἐκ) the bread and of the cup. Let him diligently examine himself, and then let him eat; let him drink. Let him come! “For this holy Sacrament hath been instituted for the special comfort and strengthening of those who humbly confess their sins and hunger and thirst after righteousness.

“But if we thus examine ourselves, we shall find nothing is us but sin and death, from which we can in no wise set ourselves free. Therefore our Lord Jesus Christ hath had mercy upon us and hath taken upon Himself our nature, that so He might fulfill for us the whole will and Law of God and for us and for our deliverance suffer death and all that we by our sins have deserved. And to the end that we should the more confidently believe this and be strengthened by our faith in a cheerful obedience to His holy Will, He hath instituted the holy Sacrament of His supper, in which He feedeth us with His body and giveth us to drink of His blood.

“Therefore, whoso eateth of this bread and drinketh of this cup, firmly believing the words of Christ, dwelleth in Christ, and Christ is him, and hath eternal life.” (from “The Exhortation,” TLH, p. 47)

This most excellent passage in the liturgical section of our hymnal is part of the official survivor of the formal *Beichtgottesdienst* which our forefathers regularly held prior to every communion service. It expresses well the intention and goal of Paul’s admonition, “Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”

“Because whoever eats and drinks without discerning the [Lord’s] body, eats and drinks his own condemnation,” Paul concludes. The AV reads, “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.” The omission of ἀναξίως in major codices and manuscripts is of no consequence to the understanding of text. With or without it, μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα describes the attitude of the unworthy participant and is the cause of God’s adverse judgment (κρίμα) on him, i.e., of God’s condemnation.

The AV reading, “damnation,” is too strong for us. In modern religious usage “damnation” is the technical term for condemnation to everlasting punishment or the punishment itself. The AV, however, does temper its translation by Putting the word “judgment” in the footnote. But that word is too neutral to reflect the original. While ἡ κρίσις describes the *process* of judgment (see John 5:22, 27, 30; 2 Thess. 1:5; etc.), τὸ κρίμα refers to the *decision*. It is the judgment pronounced, the completed action; and in most cases it means the adverse judgment, or condemnation (2 Peter 2:3; Rev. 17:1; etc.). Since according to common usage, the word can be translated either as “judgment” or “condemnation,” our choice, of course, must bow in obedience to the context. And the choice is easy. For if the wrath of God (the sign of His condemnation) “is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,” how serious and severe that condemnation must be of those in particular who make themselves guilty of sinning directly against the body and blood of Jesus! Furthermore, Paul’s careful and able use of the variations of κρίνω in 1 Corinthians 11:29-34 more than aids us to a sufficient-understanding of the section as a whole:

“For whoever eats and drinks without διακρίνων [clearly distinguishing, appreciating, discerning] *the (Lord’s) body, eats and drinks his own κρίμα. For this reason many in your midst are weak and sick and a good number are fast asleep.* [Whether this is meant literally—taking κοιμῶνται, of course, as a euphemism for death—or figuratively, in reference to their brand of Christian behavior and spiritual life, I cannot say. The Corinthians knew what he meant, and, with their knowledge, they now had the official interpretation that God did not approve, but condemned, what they were doing.] For if we διεκρίνομεν ourselves [connoting: as

thoroughly and objectively as is humanly possible], *we would not ἐκρινόμεθα* [arrive at a correct *χρίμα*, i.e., be condemned. For the latitude of meaning check the multiple use of the verb in John 3:17,18 and Romans 14:22,23.]. *But when we are κρινόμενοι* [must still mean “condemned,” since it immediately follows *ἐκρινόμεθα*], *we are being chastened by the Lord, in order that we might not be κατακριθῶμεν* [damned!] *with the world. So, then, my brethren, when you come together to eat* [i.e., to eat the Lord’s body and blood in the Sacrament], *wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so you do not assemble to (your) χρίμα* [condemnation].”

In brief, then, an “unworthy participant” at the Lord’s Supper is a person who does not judge, or discern, what he is receiving in the Sacrament. He does not believe that there Christ offers and gives him His true body, and true blood for the forgiveness of sins. When he participates, he still receives—in, with, and under the bread and wine—the Lord’s true body and true blood. But his unbelief disqualifies him from receiving the benefits. Instead, he becomes guilty of sinning against Christ in the most personal manner that is humanly possible. And instead of a blessing, he receives a curse. While the pastor is saying, “Depart in peace!” God is saying to him, “Depart from me, ye wicked!” And unless he repents and looks again to Christ for forgiveness and salvation, he will “go into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.”

But the Lord is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 2:9b). Paul’s pastoral message to the church at Corinth compels us to see that God is good and merciful and patient and forgiving and filled with zeal and love for His people. He is continually watching over them, judging their thoughts and their deeds, condemning that which displeases Him—but always in accord with His saving purpose, that as a result of His judgments and chastisements they might repent and seek Christ where He is—in His Word and in His Supper—and not be damned with the unbelieving world.

II

In terms of complication, confusion, subtlety and intrigue, the Crypto-Calvinistic controversy has few rivals in Church history. At the same time, it is an episode which we, as Lutheran pastors, do not dare to ignore. It is a classical example of God’s faithfulness in spite of man’s unfaithfulness, to be sure. But it is also the period which gave the Protestant world of today its form and direction and distinguished Dr. Luther as the foremost teacher ever to arise in the New Testament Church since the days of the Apostles.

In His wisdom and mercy, God did not allow His truth to recede and to disappear from view when Luther departed this life. Even though it appeared for a time as if the formidable and zealous followers of Zwingli, Calvin, and Melancthon-come-lately were about to tear Lutheranism apart from within and from without, God had already planned their demise. He let them rage only until they had sufficiently provoked our fathers into completing the confessional fortress which Luther had begun to construct—not with hay and stubble on shifting sand, but on the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles and with the pure gold of the Gospel of Christ.

The Sacrament of the Altar, which the Calvinists tried to desecrate with the dross of their private opinion, *is* the Gospel. And a true and correct understanding and use of it is a necessary bulwark of defense against the arrows of Satan. Therefore God raised up a large army of good and faithful men, such as Joachim Westphal, John Brenz, Martin Chemnitz, and Jacob Andreae. Through their testimony Christ reaffirmed His presence with His Church on earth in the “visible word” of the Holy Supper, and He loudly witnessed against those who shut their eyes and refused to see Him in it.

Back when the battle lines were drawn at the Marburg Colloquy (1529), the mode of Christ’s presence in the Sacrament emerged as the chief point of controversy. Over against Paul’s teaching about “unworthy participants” at the Lord’s Supper, Zwingli, and later Bucer, Calvin and Melancthon, tried to cultivate a cavalier attitude. For Germany, Melancthon’s calculated silence on the matter was most significant of all, since he was the hopeful successor to Luther’s chair of honor in the Church.

It is obvious that the Calvinists, if that is what they wanted to remain, had to back as far away as possible from 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. For the passage can only be understood in light of Christ's real, substantial, bodily presence in the Sacrament. Furthermore, it directly teaches that presence.

Realizing this, the authors of the *Formula of Concord* broke the silence and treated the subject of unworthy participants at the Lord's Supper as extensively as they did.

The following, then, is a compendium of quotations pertaining to our theme and taken from the Formula, Section VII, "Of the Lord's Supper." For the sake of order, the material has been arranged under five headings. The quotations from the Epitome are blocked and centered on the page. The quotations from the Thorough Declaration retain the regular margins.

1. *What was the status of the controversy in respect to worthy participation at the Lord's Table?*

Whether in the Holy Supper the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are truly and essentially present, are distributed with the bread and wine, and received with the mouth by all those who use this Sacrament, whether they be worthy or unworthy, godly or ungodly, believing or unbelieving; by the believing for consolation and life, by the unbelieving for judgment? The Sacramentarians say, No; We say, Yes. (par. 2)

Although some Sacramentarians strive to employ words that come as close as possible to the *Augsburg Confession* and the form and mode of speech in its [our] churches, and confess that in the Holy Supper the body of Christ is truly received by believers, still, when we insist that they state their meaning properly, sincerely, and clearly, they all declare themselves unanimously thus: that the true essential body and blood of Christ is absent from the consecrated bread and wine in the Holy Supper as far as the highest heaven is from the earth. For thus their own words run: *Abesse Christi corpus et sanguinem a signis tanto intervallo dicimus, quanto abest terra ab altissimis coelis*. That is: "We say that the body and blood of Christ are as far from the signs as the earth is distant from the highest heaven." Therefore they understand this presence of the body of Christ not as a presence here upon earth, but only *respectu fidei* (with respect to faith) when they speak of the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper, they do not mean that they are present upon earth, except with respect to faith, that is, that our faith, reminded and excited by the visible signs, just as by the Word preached, elevates itself and ascends above all heavens, and receives and enjoys the body of Christ, which is there in heaven present, yea, Christ Himself, together with all His benefits, in a manner true and essential, but nevertheless *spiritual only*. For [they hold that] as the bread and wine are here upon earth and not in heaven, so the body of Christ is now in heaven and not upon earth, and consequently nothing else is received by the mouth in the Holy Supper than bread and wine (par. 2,3).

Afterwards, when they were forced by Christ's words to confess that the body of Christ is present in the Supper, they still understood and declared it in no other way than spiritually [only of a spiritual presence] that is, of partaking through faith of His power, efficacy, and benefits, because [they say] through the Spirit of Christ, who is everywhere, our bodies, in which the Spirit of Christ dwells here upon earth, are united with the body of Christ, which is in heaven (par. 5).

The consequence was that many great men were deceived by these fine, plausible words, when they alleged and boasted that they were of no other opinion than that the Lord Christ is present in His [Holy] Supper truly, essentially, and as one alive; but they understand this according to His divine nature alone, and not of His body and blood, which, they say, are now in heaven, and nowhere else, and that He gives us with the bread and wine His true body and blood to eat, to partake of them spiritually through faith, but not bodily with the mouth (par. 6).

But that the body of Christ is present here upon earth in the Supper essentially, although invisibly and incomprehensibly, and is received orally, with the consecrated bread, even by hypocrites or those who are Christians only in appearance [by name], this they are accustomed to execrate and condemn as a horrible blasphemy (par. 9).

Over against this it is taught in the *Augsburg Confession* from God's Word concerning the Lord's Supper: That the true body and blood of Christ are truly present in the Holy Supper under the form of bread and wine, and are there dispensed and received (par. 9).

2. *What, exactly, do unworthy participants at the Lord's Supper receive?*

We believe, teach, and confess that not only the true believers [in Christ] and the worthy, but also the unworthy and unbelievers, receive the true body and blood of Christ; however, not for life and consolation, but for judgment and condemnation, if they are not converted and do not repent, 1 Cor. 11, 27,29 (par. 16).

For although they thrust Christ from themselves as a Savior, yet they must admit Him even against their will as a strict Judge, who is just as present also to exercise and render judgment upon impenitent guests as He is present to work life and consolation in the hearts of the true believers and worthy guests (par. 17).

On the other hand, we unanimously reject and condemn the erroneous [teaching] ... that not the omnipotent words of Christ's testament, but faith, produces and makes [is the cause of] the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper; and that unbelieving, impenitent Christians do not receive the true body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, but only bread and wine (par. 35,37).

The following *Formula Concordiae*, that is, articles of Christian agreement, between the Saxon theologians and those of Upper Germany was composed and signed at Wittenberg, in the year 1536, by Dr. Martin Luther and other theologians on both sides: "... They hold that the institution of this Sacrament made by Christ is efficacious in Christendom [the Church], and that it does not depend upon the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister who offers the Sacrament, or of the one who receives it. Therefore, as St. Paul says, that even the unworthy partake of the Sacrament, they hold that also to the unworthy the body and blood of Christ are truly offered, and the unworthy truly receive them, if where, the institution and command of the Lord Christ are observed. But such persons receive them to condemnation, as St. Paul says; for they misuse the holy Sacrament, because they receive it without true repentance and without faith." (Par. 12,16)

The *Smalcald Articles* declare: "The bread and wine in the Holy Supper are the true body and blood of Jesus Christ, which are offered and received, not only by the godly, but also by godless Christians [those who have nothing Christian except the name]" (par. 19).

Dr. Luther has also more amply expounded and confirmed this opinion from God's Word in the Large Catechism, where it is written: "... Even though a knave take or distribute the Sacrament, he receives the true Sacrament, that is, the true body and blood of Christ, just as truly as he who receives or administers it in the most worthy manner. For it is not founded upon the holiness of men, but upon the Word of God. And as no saint upon earth, yea, no angel in heaven, can change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, so also can no one change or alter it, even though it be abused.

"For the Word, by which it became a sacrament and was instituted, does not become false because of the person or his unbelief. For He does not say: If you believe or are worthy, you will receive My body and blood, but: Take, eat and drink; this is My body and blood"; likewise: "Do this" (namely, what I now do, institute, give, and bid you take). That is as much as to say, No matter whether you be worthy or unworthy, you have here His body and blood, by virtue of these words which are added to the bread and wine. This mark and observe well; for upon these words rest all our foundation, protection, and defense against all error and temptation that have ever come or may yet come.

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here His body and blood, I by virtue of these words which are added to the bread and wine. Then mark and observe well; for upon these words rest all our foundation, protection, and defense against all error and temptation that have ever come or may yet come.”

Thus far the *Large Catechism* in which the true presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper is established from God’s Word; and this [presence] is understood not only of the believing and worthy, but also of the unbelieving and unworthy (par. 20, 24-27).

Doctor Luther, of blessed memory, presents, among other articles, this also: “In the same manner I also speak and confess (he says) concerning the Sacrament of the Altar, that there the body and blood of Christ are in truth orally eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, even though the priests [ministers] who administer it [the Lord’s Supper], or those who receive it, should not believe or otherwise misuse it. For it does not depend upon the faith or unbelief of men, but upon God’s Word and ordinance, unless they first change God’s Word and ordinance and interpret it otherwise, as the enemies of the Sacrament do at the present day, who, of course, have nothing but bread and wine; for they also do not have the words and appointed ordinance of God, but have perverted and changed them according to their own [false] notion” (par. 32).

In his *Last Confession* he writes thus: “I rate as one concoction, namely, as Sacramentarians and fanatics, which they also are, all who will not believe that the Lord’s bread in the Supper is His true natural body, which the godless or Judas received with the mouth, as well as did St. Peter and all [other] saints; he who will not believe this (I say) should let me alone, and hope for no fellowship with me; this is not going to be altered [thus my opinion stands, which I am not going to change]” (par. 33).

St. Paul explains the words of Christ in 1 Cor. 10, 16, where he writes as follows: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” is to be considered with all diligence and seriousness [accurately], as an especially clear testimony of the true, essential presence and distribution of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper. From this we clearly learn that not only the cup which Christ blessed at the first Supper, and not only the bread which Christ broke and distributed, but also that which *we* break and bless, is the communion of the body and blood of Christ, so that all who eat this bread and drink of this cup truly receive, and are partakers of, the true body and blood of Christ. For if the body of Christ were present and partaken of, not truly and essentially, but only according to its power and efficacy, the bread would have to be called, not a communion of the body, but of the Spirit, power, and benefits of Christ, as the Apology argues and concludes. And if Paul were speaking only of the spiritual communion of the body of Christ through faith, as the Sacramentarians pervert this passage, he would not say that the bread, but that the spirit or faith, was the communion of the body of Christ. But as he says that the bread is the communion of the body of Christ, that all who partake of the consecrated bread also become partakers of the body of Christ, he must indeed be speaking, not of a spiritual, but of a sacramental or oral participation of the body of Christ, which is common to godly and godless Christians [Christians only in name] (par. 54-56).

This is shown also by the causes and circumstances of this entire exposition of St. Paul, in which he deters and warns those who ate of offerings to idols and had fellowship with heathen devil-worship, and nevertheless went also to the table of the Lord and became partakers of the body and blood of Christ, lest they receive the body and blood of Christ for judgment and condemnation to themselves. For since all those who become partakers of the consecrated and broken bread in the Supper have communion also with the body of Christ, St. Paul indeed cannot be speaking of spiritual communion with Christ, which no man can abuse, and against which also no one is to be warned (Par. 57).

For that not only the godly, pious, and believing Christians, but also unworthy, godless hypocrites, as Judas and his ilk, who have no spiritual communion with Christ, and go to the Table of the Lord without true repentance and conversion to God, also receive orally in the Sacrament the true body and [true] blood of Christ, and by their unworthy eating and drinking grievously sin against the body and blood of Christ, St. Paul teaches expressly. For he says, 1 Cor. 11,27: “Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily,” sins not merely against the bread and wine, not merely against the signs or symbols and emblems

of the body and blood, but “shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ,” which, as there [in the Holy Supper] present, he dishonors, abuses, and disgraces, as the Jews, who in very deed violated the body of Christ and killed Him; just as the ancient Christian Fathers and church-teachers unanimously have understood and explained this passage (par. 60).

There is, therefore, a twofold eating of the flesh of Christ, one spiritual, of which Christ treats especially John 6, 54, which occurs in no other way than with the Spirit and faith, in the preaching and meditation of the Gospel, as well as in the Lord’s Supper, and by itself is useful and salutary, and necessary at all times for salvation to all Christians; without which spiritual participation also the sacramental or oral eating in the Supper is not only not salutary, but even injurious and damning [a cause of condemnation]. But this spiritual eating is nothing else than faith (par. 61, 62).

The other eating of the body of Christ is *oral* or *sacramental*, when the true, essential body and blood of Christ are also orally received and partaken of in the Holy Supper, by all who eat and drink the consecrated bread and wine in the Supper—by the believing as a certain pledge and assurance that their sins are surely forgiven them, and Christ dwells and is efficacious in them, but by the unbelieving for their judgment and condemnation, as the words of the institution by Christ expressly declare (par. 63).

All the ancient Christian teachers expressly, and in full accord with the entire holy Christian Church, teach, according to these words of the institution and the explanation of St. Paul, that the body of Christ is not only received spiritually by faith, which occurs also outside of [the use of] the Sacrament, but also orally, not only by believing and godly, but also by unworthy, unbelieving, false, and wicked Christians. As this is too long to be narrated here, we would, for the sake of brevity, have the Christian reader referred to the exhaustive writings of our theologians (par. 66).

The twofold participation of the body and blood of Christ, occurs either by faith, spiritually, or also orally, both by worthy and unworthy [which latter is common to worthy and unworthy] (par. 72).

Meanwhile, however, we must call attention also to this, that the Sacramentarians, artfully and wickedly pervert this useful and necessary rule (i.e. that apart from the correct *usus*—consecration, distribution, and reception—there is no sacrament), in order to deny the true, essential presence and oral partaking of the body of Christ, which occurs here upon earth alike by the worthy and the unworthy, and interpret it as referring to the *usus fidei*, that is, to the spiritual and inner use of faith, as though it were no sacrament to the unworthy, and the partaking of the body occurred only spiritually, through faith, or as though faith made the body of Christ present in the Holy Supper, and therefore unworthy, unbelieving hypocrites did not receive the body of Christ as being present.

Now, it is not our faith that makes the sacrament, but only the true word and institution of our almighty God and Savior Jesus Christ, which always is and remains efficacious is the Christian Church, and is not invalidated or rendered inefficacious by the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister, nor by the unbelief of the one who receives it. Just as the Gospel, even though godless hearers do not believe it, yet is and remains none the less the true Gospel, only it does not work for salvation in the unbelieving; so, whether those who receive the Sacrament believe or do not believe, Christ remains none the less true in His words when He says: “Take eat: this is My body,” and effects this [His presence] not by our faith, but by His omnipotence (par. 88,89).

We reject also the teaching that unbelieving and impenitent, wicked Christians, who only bear the name of Christ, but do not have the right, true, living, and saving faith, receive in the Supper not the body and blood of Christ, but only bread and wine. And since there are only two kinds of guests found at this heavenly meal, the worthy and the unworthy, we reject also the distinction made among the unworthy [made by some who assert] that the godless Epicureans and scoffers at God’s Word, who are in the external fellowship of the Church, when using the Holy Supper, do not receive the body and blood of Christ for condemnation, but only bread and wine (par. 123).

3. *How many kinds of unworthy participants are there?*

We believe, teach, and confess also that there is only one kind of unworthy guests, namely, those who do not believe, concerning whom it is written John 3,18: “He that believeth not is condemned already.” And this judgment becomes greater and more grievous, being aggravated, by the unworthy use of the Holy Supper, 1 Cor. 11, 29 (par. 18).

The unworthy ... misuse the holy Sacrament, because they receive it without true repentance and without faith (Par. 16, quoted from the *Wittenberg Concord* of 1536).

But it must [also] be carefully explained who are the unworthy guests of this Supper, namely, those who go to this Sacrament without true repentance and sorrow for their sins, and without true faith and the good intention of amending their lives, and by their unworthy oral eating of the body of Christ load themselves with damnation, that is, with temporal and eternal punishments, and become guilty of the body and blood of Christ (par. 68).

4. *Does a weak faith ever make a person an unworthy participant?*

We believe, teach, and confess that no true believer, as long as he retains living faith, however weak he may be, receives the Holy Supper to his judgment, which was instituted especially for Christians weak in faith, yet penitent, for the consolation and strengthening of their weak faith [Matt. 9, 12: 11, 5. 28] (par. 19).

We unanimously reject and condemn the erroneous [teaching] ... that even the true believers, who have and retain a true, living, pure faith in Christ, can receive this Sacrament to their judgment, because they are still imperfect in their outward life (par. 39).

For Christians who are of weak faith, diffident, troubled, and heartily terrified because of the greatness and number of their sins, and think that in this their great impurity they are not worthy of this precious treasure and the benefits of Christ, and who feel and lament their weakness of faith, and from their hearts desire that they may serve God with stronger, more joyful faith and pure obedience, they are the truly worthy guests for whom this highly venerable Sacrament [and sacred feast] has been especially instituted and appointed; as Christ says, Matt. 11,28: “Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Also Matt. 9,12: “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that be sick.” Also [2 Cor. 12,9]: “God’s strength is made perfect in weakness.” Also [Rom. 14,1]: “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye [v. 3], for God hath received him. For whosoever believeth in the Son of God, (be it with a strong or with a weak faith) has eternal life” [John 3,15 f.] (par. 70).

Worthiness does not depend upon great or small weakness or strength of faith, but upon the merit of Christ, which the distressed father of little faith [Mark 9,24] enjoyed as well as Abraham, Paul, and others who have a joyful and strong faith (par. 71).

We reject and condemn ... the teaching that even true believers, who have and keep a right, true, living faith, and yet lack the said sufficient preparation of their own, could, just as the unworthy guests, receive this Sacrament to condemnation (par. 125).

5. *In what, then, does true worthiness consist?*

We believe, teach, and confess that all the worthiness of the guests of this heavenly feast is and consists in the most holy obedience and perfect merit of Christ alone, which we appropriate to ourselves by true faith, and whereof [of the application of this merit] we are assured by the Sacrament, and not at all in [but in nowise does this worthiness depend upon] our virtues or inward and outward preparations. (Par. 20)

We unanimously reject and condemn the erroneous [teaching] ... that the worthiness of the guests at this heavenly meal consists not alone in true faith in Christ, but also in the external preparation of men (par. 17).

So, too, (we reject and condemn) the teaching that worthiness consists not only in true faith, but in man's own preparation (par. 124).

III

In spite of the clear words of Paul and the sheer weight of this testimony regarding the fact and nature of unworthy participation at the Lord's Supper, there is a willing and energetic movement in modern American Lutheranism to follow Melanchthon into silence on the subject. At the same time there is a growing "tendency to indulge in ... happy oblivion," as Hermann Sasse describes it, in the worship-life of the Church in our day. This "tendency" is especially apparent in popular views on the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Melanchthon's silence regarding unworthy participation was more than just an attempt to stay out of the arena in times of controversy. History bears out that he had already begun to cultivate doubts about Luther's teaching on the Lord's Supper already in the late 1520s. His hesitation grew and was nourished by his friendship with Oecolampadius, Bucer, and finally with Calvin. In the infamous 1540 edition of his *Variata*, he substituted *exhibeantur* for the *Augsburg Confession's* *diatribuantur* where it referred to Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. Since the word *exhibere* can mean either "to give" or "to offer," it suited him well—as it also was acceptable to the Reformed, who understood it as not connoting the *manducatio impiorum*. In the *Wittenberg Concord* (1536), which the Thorough Declaration quotes in full, the term *indignorum* is used instead of *impiorum*—interestingly so, because it represents an early concession which Melanchthon made to Bucer at the time when they were putting the document together. Bucer was willing to accept the term "unworthy" on his own terms, that is, not to include the "wicked" and "godless." Luther, who evidently was deceived by Melanchthon on this matter, finally signed the document. In addition to this, Melanchthon was careful not to require Bucer to agree with Luther's "in, with, and under" formula. *Cum* would be acceptable; *in*, maybe; but *sub*—never. Consequently the *Wittenberg Concord* reads (in the original, German edition), "*Demnach halten und lehren sie, dass mit dem Brot and Wein wahrhaftig und zugegen sei, gereicht und empfangen werde der Leib und das Blut Christi.*"

What began as a concession for Melanchthon finally became his obsession. Though he would in subsequent writings speak of a real (*vere*) presence, even of a personal, substantial, simultaneous, ecclesial, ritual, and efficacious presence, he would *not* concede that Christ was *bodily* present *sub pane*. In other words, while he could speak of the "Real Presence," he, in fact, denied it. And thus he had to conclude that the ungodly did not receive Christ's true body and true blood in the Sacrament. Yet all the while that Melanchthon was in doubt and misery, wrestling with terms which would never bring him to a certain conviction, Dr. Luther attended the Lord's Supper with eagerness and confidence, simply clinging to the clear words and promises of God. He knew what Paul meant when he spoke of eating and drinking "unworthily"; by the same token, he knew where true worthiness was to be found; and he received the reward of his faith.

It is important for us to be aware of the subtle changes in Melanchthon's theology. In fact, studies like this are vital for us, since we are living at a time in which change-for-the-sake-of-change has become an object of worship. But even if we hear a hundred-thousand voices yearning for the immediate overthrow of everything that smells of obsolescence—in the Church we cannot, we dare not, rush headlong. If we do, it will be (God forbid!) our downfall. For God will not tolerate those who hammer and saw away at His Word as though it were a piece of lumber. Our business is to deal with sacred jots and tittles. And that takes time. Melanchthon, on the other hand, was a pensive and deliberate man, but he fell into the error of dealing with the jots and tittles of human reason. The danger of erring in either extreme is always present.

For example, the February issue of the *Lutheran Quarterly* (published by the Editorial Council of the theological seminaries of the ALC and LCA) carries an excellent and scholarly article by Ralph W. Quere on the direction of Melanchthon's thought on the Lord's Supper. In it he shows a clear understanding of the differences between Luther and Melanchthon, yet in the end he sides with Melanchthon and concludes that his approach is more "mature" than Luther's. He likes Melanchthon's clever and compromising choice of words

and would doubtless approve of their use in the Church. It would be a fine way of abolishing anyone's "fear" of going to the Lord's Table, if Melancthon's silence would only return!

Perhaps it will—in the "happy oblivion" of a new Lutheran Eucharist. Herbert Lindemann, in an article entitled, "Constancy and Change: Mode and Mood in Lutheran Worship," writes about a "new mood" regarding the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the Lutheran Church of today: "The new mood is characterized by shifts in emphasis from the old. This may be illustrated (by) ... our concept of the Sacrament of the Altar and the place which it is intended to occupy in the life of the Church. If we think of Holy Communion predominantly in terms of the forgiveness of sins, our practice will be affected by this in several ways (1) communion will be almost exclusively an individualistic transaction between the worshipper and the Lord, (2) we will be thinking about our sins at least as much, if not more, than about God's forgiveness, (3) the fear of judgment will be in the picture (eating and drinking damnation to oneself), (4) going to the Sacrament will be something of an ordeal not to be endured too frequently and (5) the whole experience will add up to a ponderous thing, oppressive, gloomy rich, no doubt, is why some parishes seem to think the most ideal time for Holy Communion is Good Friday.

"But if, on the other hand, we think of the Sacrament predominantly as Eucharist, then some opposite things will happen: (7) we will acknowledge the presence of the living Lord with joyful praise, and this will be expressed in the kind of hymns that are sung, the spirit in which the service is chanted, and the whole attitude of the presiding clergyman; (2) since communion with Christ is to be welcomed rather than shunned, our participation in the Sacrament will be frequent, (3) we will become conscious of the horizontal side of the experience, that is, of the beauty of the family meal, shared by brothers and sisters in the Lord, (4) we will begin to appreciate the intimate connection between Holy Communion and the Church year, so that no festival day—nor any Sunday—will seem complete without a feeding of the sacramental feast, and (5) we will think of Holy Communion as our food and drink along the way, the necessary spiritual sustenance for a pilgrim en route to the Promised Land" (*Response*, Vol. XIII, No. 3).

The devil himself could compose words no finer than these! "Don't talk much about the forgiveness of sins," he tells us. "Do away with your confessional hymns. Dismiss the thought of God's judgment. All of these things will only drive you away from the Sacrament. Drown them all, and just be happy because you are all here together." Here is a real thief and scoundrel, who articulates well what Melancthon did not dare to say.

How different are the words of Luther: "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that be sick"; that is, those who are weary and heavy-laden with their sins, with the fear of death, temptations of the flesh and of the devil. If, therefore, you are heavy laden and feel your weakness, then go joyfully to this Sacrament and obtain refreshment, consolation, and strength. For if you would wait until you are rid of such burdens, that you might come to the Sacrament pure and worthy, you must forever stay away. For in that case He pronounces sentence and says: If you are pure and godly, you have no need of Me, and I, in turn, none of thee. Therefore those alone are called unworthy who neither feel their infirmities nor wish to be considered sinners." (*The Large Catechism*, Part 5, par. 71-74).

What Paul teaches us is true. There is such a thing as unworthy participation at the Lord's Table. And we have the calling and command of God to instruct, encourage, warn, and admonish our people accordingly, so that they do not perish (and we with them for being miserable and careless stewards, and partakers of their sins). As much as we are able, let us test every Communion liturgy, hymn, instruction manual, etc., that is offered for use in our churches, against the words of Paul and of our Lord—and against the words of our Lutheran Confessions, because they can alert us to the tricks of the Pope and of the Calvinists, who apparently are not willing to leave us alone until they have robbed us of the Gospel. The Sacrament is the Gospel.

And in order to safeguard the instruction of our children and grandchildren on these important matters, I would request that the Catechism Revision Committee reinsert the words, "worthily," "worthy," and "unworthy" where they have been either omitted entirely, or replaced by the bloodless term "properly," in the Sixth Chief Part of the *Contemporary Translation* [sic]. I would further request that the title be changed from "The Sacrament of Holy Communion" back to "The Sacrament of the Altar"; that line 314 be changed to read,

“It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, *under* (or, in, with and under) the bread and wine,” instead of “*together with* the bread and wine”; that line 330 read, “forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation *are given us*,” instead of, “Through these words *we receive*, etc.”; that line 333 be changed from “How can eating and drinking do such great things?” to “How can *physical* eating, etc.” (i.e., as opposed to spiritual eating); that line 336 be changed to read, “These words, along with the eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament,” (*quae verba sunt una cum; welche Worte sind neben dem*); that “Fasting and other outward preparations *serve a good purpose*” be changed to, “Fasting and other bodily preparations are a fine outward training (*Zucht; disciplina*); and finally, that “not prepared,” at the end of line 34 be changed to “unfit” (*ungeschickt; imparatus*). Some of these changes are not essential; some of them, I believe, are. In any case, I am fully convinced that unless it can be demonstrated that there are substantial, heavy, and compelling reasons, Luther’s wording ought to be retained as precisely as possible. It may be true that he never closed the door on the possibility that someone else might be able to improve upon his words in the Catechism. But if anyone ventures to do it, let him do it boldly—for if, in the process, he ruins it, Luther may well rise out of his grave and tear it out of his hands.

Luther knew what he was doing. He not only wrote the Catechism, but he also disciplined himself by reviewing it every day. If the words which he appended to his *Large Confession* apply with force to any of his writings at all, they must be applied above all to the “jewel” of the Reformation:

“Since I see that as time wears on, sects and errors increase, and that there is no end to the rage and fury of Satan, in order that henceforth during my life or after my death some of them may not, in future, support themselves by me, and falsely quote my writings to strengthen their error, as the Sacramentarians and Anabaptists begin to do, I mean by this writing to confess my faith, point by point, before God and all the world, in which I intend to abide until my death, and therein (so help me God!) to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. And if after my death anyone should say: If Dr. Luther were living now, he would teach and hold this or that article differently, for he did not sufficiently consider it—against this I say now as then, and then as now, that, by God’s grace, I have most diligently compared all these articles with the Scriptures time and again, and often have gone over them, and would defend them as confidently as I have now defended the Sacrament of the Altar. I am not drunk nor thoughtless; I know what I am saying; I also am sensible of what it means for me at the coming of the Lord Christ at the final judgment. Therefore I want no one to regard this as a jest or mere idle talk; it is a serious matter to me; for by God’s grace I know Satan a good deal; if he can pervert or confuse God’s Word, what will he not do with my words or those of another?” (quoted in F.C., Art. VII, par, 29-31).

In Conclusion

It is appropriate, now and always, to thank and to praise our God for His mercy in giving us His holy, saving Word and for the gift of faithful and concerned fathers, who bequeathed to us a correct, confessional understanding of that Word. The 450 years which separate us from the Formula of Concord are in themselves a monument to its accuracy. Centuries of reexamination and reconsideration have not been able to bring a single Scriptural indictment against its conclusions.

This document and, with it, the entire Book of Concord are the principal of our Reformation heritage. But how long will we possess it? How wisely are we investing it? For our enemy, Satan, is burning with anger and hatred against us, and he would gladly rob us of every godly and salutary thought, word, and confession. It is written that “while men slept” an enemy sowed tares among their wheat. Let us pray that the clear trumpet of God’s Word will never fail to rally us to combat that kind of lethargy which has already brought countless individuals, families, churches, and even entire nations, into spiritual poverty and death. We are no better than other men, and no less susceptible than they; the devil knows where we live too. On the other hand, when we also see how men of great genius, piety, perception, and energy—men like Philip Melanchthon, who framed the fundamental symbol of the Lutheran Church—can fall so quickly and so far, we may well wonder what will become of us, who are hardly made of nobler stuff.

Each one of us must confess with Paul, “By the grace of God I am what I am.” In His unsearchable love and goodness and mercy and grace, God has called us by the Gospel of His Son. Through the preaching of the Cross and the right administration of the Sacraments, He has given us new life, new hope. He said, “Receive thy sight!” and we are able to see. He put His fingers in our ears and His saliva on our tongues and commanded us to preach the Word which He committed to our ears and to our hearts.

May God the Holy Ghost preserve that Word among us and equip us to proclaim it in our generation without equivocation, with zeal and understanding, and in the spirit of our faithful fathers. All glory to our God and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.